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ABSTRACT

This study examined the viewing preferences of high school students, with a focus on high school age males. The purpose of the study was to explore the media's perpetuation of stereotypes, and how these representations influence the students' self-identity and perceptions of gender roles. Participants were 77 high school students in a medium-sized town in the Southwestern United States. A review of the literature was conducted, and a survey was administered during normal school hours, asking the students to identify their favorite television program and why, and their favorite character and why. Results showed striking differences between males and females in terms of viewing preferences. Females based their reasons for liking characters on intellectual or personal character traits rather than physical ones. The majority of males tended to prefer shows that had violent, sexual, or crude themes, and to enjoy characters based on stereotypic traits (tough, violent and rude males and attractive females). Implications are discussed. Contains 25 references. (AEF)

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The Role of Television Programming on Secondary Students' Self Identity

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> On average, Americans spend more than four hours a day watching television... which in turn adds up to 1,456 hours a year. That is 60 days or two months out of every year watching TV! If an individual maintained such habits for a 72-year lifetime, 12 years would be spent in front of the tube. Assuming eight hours of sleep a night, that becomes one fourth of time spent awake.
>
> (Hazen & Winokus, 1997, p. 63)

Introduction

This study began as a project for a doctoral class that the researchers were involved in during the spring semester of 1999. During one class discussion, the topic of media literacy was brought up and the researchers decided to investigate the role of television in the lives of students today. Initially, we attempted to look at three different age groups however, for the purposes of this paper, the focus centered on high school aged males. The researchers remember the stereotypes portrayed during our own adolescence in television shows such as *Little House on the Prairie* and questioned if this phenomena continued to occur and if so, how does this effect high school aged students who are still developing their own sense of identity?

On average, 22,000 hours of television are watched by the typical American child by the age of eighteen. (Graddol & Swann, 1989). With this many hours of viewing, it is no wonder that television has become a mirror that reflects what society accepts as correct gender behavior.

"Whether commercials influence society of society influences commercials, there is a connection between popular thinking and the media." (Kaufman, 1999, p. 441). Our study is an attempt to ascertain what programs high school students are currently watching in order to see how these may possibly influence their own self-identity and perceptions of gender roles.

After focusing the study on high school aged students and with a foundation in Lincoln & Guba's (1985), Naturalistic Inquiry model, we performed our research in the natural setting of the participants using qualitative methods. We decided to utilize open ended surveys that were distributed and collected during lunch one day at the high school. The participants of this study were 77 high school students in a medium sized South - Western town. A survey was conducted to determine television viewing preferences among this targeted age group. The researchers obtained permission to administer the survey during normal school hours. The breakdown of respondents to the survey included 40 males (53.2%) and 37 females (46.8%). The open-ended questions on the survey were:

1. What is your favorite television program and why?
2. Who is your favorite character and why?

The researchers coded the completed surveys independently, allowing the themes to emerge, then met to negotiate the final coding system. In order to probe the answers given on the surveys more deeply,

the investigators split the answers up by genders and concentrated on the male respondents for this particular paper. In addition to a review of the literature regarding gender stereotyping in the media, the researchers went on to view the programming favored by the respondents. While viewing the programs, we looked for broad themes, and then moved into character traits in order to look for behaviors, ideas and dialogue which supported traditional or non-traditional gender roles.

An analysis of the data suggests that males tend to watch programs that glorify violence as well as those which promote the notion that it is acceptable to be a fool. In addition, the traits the males focused on involved the attractiveness of the opposite sex. This presentation will discuss gender stereotyping by the media as well as the implications of the viewing preferences reported by young male viewers. The discussion will move toward a need for counteracting hegemonic images through media literacy.

Literature Review

Society today would be very different without our existing forms of communication and media. Radio, television, print and the Internet connect the world in ways that were unimaginable less than two decades ago. While we benefit from faster forms of communication and ease of access to information, we often do not think about the implications of such speed and accessibility.

Why should anyone be concerned with the availability of televisions and how this effects our lives? One reason may be that "...the way people learn about their culture and acquire some of its values, beliefs, perspectives, and social norms" is a social process (Signorelli & Bacue, 1999, p. 69). In other words, people are not born to act a certain way but learn their behavior. Historically, this job has been left up to parents, schools and churches but today the mass media plays an increasingly larger role. The messages shown on programs are not necessarily for the common good but are given "with the intent of eliciting particular beliefs and actions that are in the best interest of those who produce them" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998, p.10). The literature has shown that children are very susceptible to suggestion and the images portrayed on television (Streicher, 1974; Durkin, 1985; Wood, 1990; Signorielli, 1991; Murphy, 1998). As a result, attitudes of oppression such as racism, sexism and homophobia are perpetuated.

Because of the pervasiveness of television, the power to influence the formation of gender identification should not be underestimated. Warde (1994, as cited by Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998, p.8), states that recent cultural studies link consumption to identity formation in the consumer. In other words, to a certain extent, "we are what we consume" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998, p.8). As Wood sees it, "Besieging us from childhood through adult life, media messages reinforce and reproduce gendered identity" (1990, p. 248).

Television programs continue to perpetuate stereotypical images and it is our contention that television reinforces 'appropriate' gender roles and strengthens traditional hegemonic attitudes. As a cultural study, we are largely concerned with the relationship among culture, knowledge, and power and as such, the role of media culture is "central to understanding how the dynamics of power, privilege, and social desire structure the daily life of a society" (Giroux, 1997, p.235). Throughout our lives, from our youngest years into adulthood what we consume as television watchers are messages which both reinforce and reproduce our gender identities. (Wood, 1990, Warde in Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998). As thoughtful educators, parents and community members we need to critically examine the television programming which children are watching and the messages about "correct" male and female roles.

Gender Roles

> Gender is a socially rather than a biologically constructed attribute-people are not born with but rather learn the behaviors and attitudes appropriate to their sex...When we refer to the society as being gendered we mean that gender represents an important division in our society (and probably all human societies). Whether one is male or female is not just a biological fact, it assigns one to membership of one of two social groups.
>
> (Graddol & Swann, 1989, p. 8)

While gender choices are in part biologically determined, clearly that which surrounds us can and does influence human development. As one of the major sources of imagery, story-telling and advertising in

our environment, one must question the presentation of gender identities and roles on television. Exposure to television increases attitudes that stereotype gender roles and seems to play an important role in shaping children's attitudes (Kaufman, 1999). A stereotype is "as exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category" (Allport, 1958, p. 187). Stereotypes are totally unsupported by facts or develop from an overgeneralization of facts. We define the term stereotypical as the portrayal of one person of any group as representative for all members. For example, all women as homemakers, men as the breadwinners, the Latina woman as being hypersexual, the Islamic male as terrorist, a stereotypical portrayal has been made.

Numerous studies have analyzed how the media portrays genders and they all seem to concur. Beginning with Streicher's research in 1974, of cartoons, in general cartoons from this era were dominated by "active, noisy" male characters while females were seen less capable and usually, "needed to be rescued" (p. 415). While this study was done more than 20 years ago, the same types of characters can be seen today. An example is the Disney cartoon Duck Tales that is currently on television. The three main characters are two young males and their sister. The boys are admonished to take care of their little sister, who is always seen sporting a pink bow and behaving helplessly. While it is true that these characters are just ducks, children can acquire stereotypical messages

about "appropriate behavior" even from what one may consider to be harmless cartoons.

Other studies have shown women to be under represented in television, in relation to their percentage of the total population; men, women and heterosexual relationships are portrayed stereo typically, women are often victimized and violence against them is normalized. (Durkin 1985a, p.102; Wood, 1990). Stereotypical portrayals of men and women include women being portrayed as dependent upon males, and men as independent individuals. (Wood, 1990; Giroux, 1998). Men tend to be found in roles where they are seen as authoritative, and many women are seen as incompetent, unable to function as authorities. Men are likely to be employed and married men are portrayed in a negative lights (Kaufman, 1999). Women are more often seen as the primary care givers, while men are given the role of the chief breadwinner. In television, women are less aggressive then men and sexual violence is most often presented with women as the victims and men their sexual aggressors (Signorelli, 1991; Wood, 1990). "Men and masculinity have frequently been treated as the 'norm' and men's portrayals in the media have often been seen as unproblematic or even exemplary" (Craig, 1992, p. 1)

Children who watch many violent action shows may begin to act out some of the behaviors and attitudes of the characters seen on television and resort increasingly to fighting with their friends to settle

disagreements. (Singer, Singer & Zuckerman, 1981). Violence in the media has been a concern of parents and educators for over 30 years. As violence in the media increases so do the concerns over the effect of this violence on the behaviors of adolescence. "The association between television violence and aggressive behavior in children is well documented" (Ballard & Lineberger, 1999, p. 543). Men who were exposed to sexually violent video games displayed increased acceptance of violence against women. (Ballard & Lineberger 1999).

While the accepted roles for men and women have changed some in the last three decades, this is not reflected in current programming and stereotypic gender images continue to be consistent in programming today (Browne 1998). Male characters are utilized more often and placed in dominant roles while females are portrayed as shy, giggly, and not likely to be assertive. Browne contends that while boys may tend to be more aggressive, assertive and domineering, assigning these characteristics to just one gender on television may lead to a distortion of 'accepted' behavior for the general population. If only one type of behavior is assigned to a gender then that behavior may tend to be viewed as the acceptable norm and any deviation from that may be seen as strange or odd. Another study explored how "factual and fictional media portrayals may activate culturally shared racial and gender stereotypes and influence subsequent judgments involving member of stereotyped groups" (Murphy, 1998). In other words, exposure to

stereotypic viewpoints may in turn effect the interpretations of an unrelated event involving diverse groups of people.

The Study

In our review of the literature, we found that there is a gap in the research during the 1980s and recently a resurgence in this area has developed. In order to find out if the trend of stereotyping in television programming continues in the high school age students today we developed a survey. When looking at the effect of gender stereotyping on children, we wanted to go directly to the source, and find out what kids in our area were watching. We developed a simple survey, asking two questions:

1. What is your favorite program and why?
2. Who is your favorite character and why?

The researchers obtained permission to survey students at high school had approximately 1600 students with a ethnicity of 60% Hispanic, 25% Anglo, 5% African-American and 10% Other. The number of respondents to the survey included 40 males (53.2%), for a total of 77. The specific age break down was as follows:

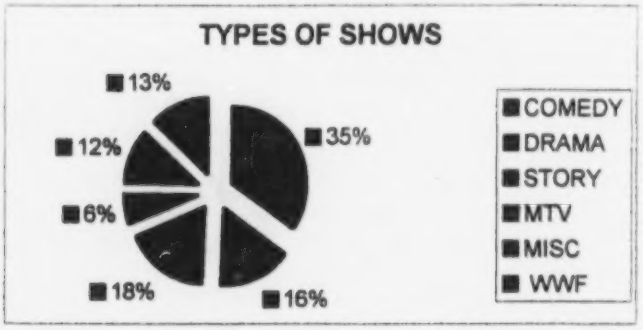
AGE	MALES	FEMALES	PERCENTAGE
14	1	3	5.2%
15	9	12	27.3%
16	13	8	27.3%
17	13	8	27.3%
18	5	4	11.6%
19	0	1	1.3%

Following Naturalistic Inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researchers utilized qualitative methods (open ended surveys) in a natural setting (a high school cafeteria during lunch). The data analysis was inductive in nature and outcomes were negotiated between three researchers. Before processing the data, the researchers discussed that there might be some type of gender split in programming preferences. Upon completion of the surveys, the researchers coded them independently then met to determine the final coding system. The programs indicated as the favorites among males were then viewed for further analysis.

Results

The data showed striking differences between males and females viewing preferences. While both sexes chose all categories except for two

(wrestling and story shows), the reasons why these young adults gave for liking shows and characters show distinct gender differences.



When looking at the categories which both sexes chose (comedy and drama), the females based their reasons for liking characters on intellectual or personal character traits rather than physical ones. The males almost to a person selected programming and characters for reasons that could be classified as overtly stereotypical. There was an overwhelming tendency of these high school boys to prefer shows that had violent, sexual or crude themes, and to enjoy characters based on stereotypic traits. Male characters were liked if they were tough, violent or rude. Female characters were only mentioned by the male participants in the context of attractiveness.

Discussion

The Tough, The Violent and the Rude

The category picked only by young men was professional wrestling. Fully 20 percent of the males surveyed liked wrestling specifically because of the violence, and the WWF characters because they are "cool". So what constitutes "coolness"? Stone Cold Steve Austin and Jeff Gold Berg were cool because they drink, are crazy and "beat the hell out of everyone". Wrestling like other forms of media violence "glorifies barbarity" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998, p.22).

After watching professional wrestling on television for the past two weeks we have come to the conclusion that professional wrestling is not a sporting event, rather an entertainment extravaganza. Gresson (1998) concurs when he says that wrestling has gone from a "participant sport to audience entertainment" (pg. 169). Pro wrestling shows may be found on three different networks everyday of the week, sometimes for up to three hours at a time on weekdays. These shows spend more time building dramas outside of the ring then they do in actual wrestling activity. For example, people don't just walk to the ring but parade down a platform to music with an entourage. Before the wrestling match begins, the participants are usually given microphones and carry on a conversation threatening each other.

Women are playing a bigger and bigger part in World Wrestling Association through very stereotypical portrayals. Women are sex

objects wearing tight clothes that display bulging breasts. Between matches there are little dance numbers performed by women that involve quite a bit of pelvic thrusts and grinding. Women are then paraded around as partners for the male wrestlers but there is one that stands out from the rest. Her name is China. This woman is a body builder probably 200 pounds of muscle who wrestles men while wearing a string leather/latex bikini and combat boots. In one match she actually did fall out of her bikini baring a breast to the cheering crowd.

Other characters include Triple X, The Rock, Mic Folley, The Gravedigger, Vince McMahon (the boss and owner of WWF) as well as his entire family including wife and children. Vince McMahon even goes beyond crass when in one episode he began insulting his daughter Stephanie on national television in regards to how she would do the entire arena. To her own credit, Stephanie returns later in the week to slap her mother in the ring for betraying her then proceeds to have her husband beat up her father and brother. This level of violence within one family is unsettling to the researchers yet the audiences seem to enjoy it immensely.

The interesting part is that wrestlers don't acknowledge that they have any responsibility to their audience except to make them happy. How does all this violence effect the audience? Based on the earlier discussion – the effects are not positive yet the wrestling community does not seem to take note. Not even when one of its own dies in the midst of

a screaming crowd. Money seems to be the stable force in this business and responsibility is missing.

Anything for a laugh

Even more of the male respondents (42.5%) liked comedy programs, and here again there was a very definite preference between the genders. All of the programs that were picked as being favorites could be classified as to do anything for a laugh as in the Tom Green Show. "He does anything for a laugh, no matter how crude or sick." and "He's crazy and has no fear when it comes to laughter and jokes." Tom Green's shows involved the title character painting his parents' car with sexually explicit material and invading their bedroom at three o'clock in the morning with Monica Lewinsky. Tom also dropped his best friends clothes out of a plane and constantly enters places of business trying to aggravate people enough to get thrown out. He even has a song he sings about trying to get people to "look at my bum."

The favorite comedy program for the males was the Simpsons. The character on the Simpsons which was most liked by survey respondents was the bumbling father Homer. He was liked because: "He's dumb", "He's stupid and hilarious". Only one viewer had anything positive to say about Homer (with the exception of the person who liked Homer because "he's the shit"). One boy wrote he liked Homer because "he's my role model", which then begs the question: What kind of role model is a stupid, clumsy person? Homer Simpson seems to play the role of a

completely incompetent and idiotic father who allows his children to do whatever they like with little thought to consequences. Perhaps Homer is appealing because adolescence is a time of awkwardness, and a character with similar traits is one that can be related to.

Another explanation by the Freestyle project cites that, "Boys ratings of male and female characters indicated that the more the (male) viewers saw a male character in stereotyped way, the more they liked him..." (Durkin 1985c, p. 216). Homer's silliness, or Tom Green's crude humor might simply be liked because these characters are stereotypical. The clear gender split may simply reflect years of input from many arenas such as advertising, sex-differentiated roles in the home and school, the predominance of males in certain fields and even the text books they have been reading for years. If the choices viewers make as teenagers is a reflection of the hegemonic messages they have been exposed to their whole lives, it would make sense that preferences reflect such a background. Indeed, by high school viewing habits are probably set, and program choice simply enforces these established preferences.

Conclusion

From what we were told by our survey respondents, it does appear that television reinforces stereotypical gender roles. Because of this tendency for bias, television programming continues to be an area of concern especially in light of the number of hours of television people will watch throughout their lives. The consequences of gender stereotypes

on society result in unrealistic and limited gender ideals which in turn can possibly prevent individuals from stepping outside the boundaries that the media portrays as female and male roles (Wood, 1990).

Educators must first be aware of what our students are watching and secondly provide a means for open discussion and analysis of the images provided through critical media literacy. Concerned teachers, researchers, and parents must go beyond simply viewing televised gender images critically, we need to actively explore curricula which encompasses critical media viewing skill. Incorporating critical media literacy skills into school curriculums is one way to help viewers develop an ability to actively discern the underlying messages which they see, rather than be passive viewers. Through media literacy, young viewers will have the opportunity to see and question what standard TV images are telling them and will be able to see themselves in unlimited roles.

Singer & Singer state that "teaching children to understand television can yield to a more critical, intelligent audience." (1998, p. 6) They continue to say that "...when one group of children receives follow-up instruction and engages in discussion about the content of the specific program viewed it makes significant gains in the comprehension of the story as well as specific cognitive gains compared to control groups that merely watch the programs..." (p. 2).

Many teachers may not want to teach critical viewing skills to children, but it is important to realize that "We must avoid the

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